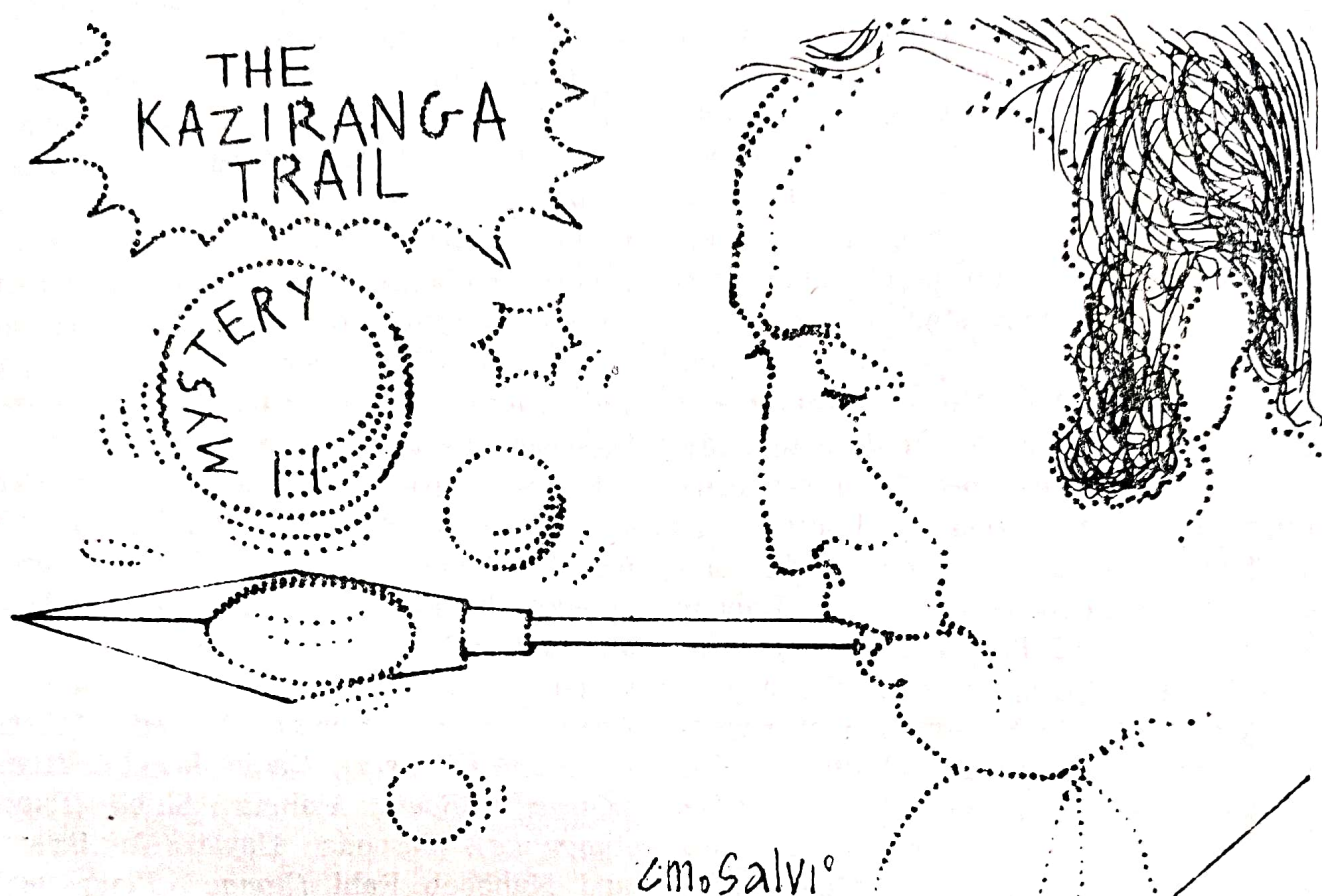


ARUP KUMAR DUTTA'S WORLD OF GRIPPING FICTION



—NITA BERRY

The suave, soft-spoken figure in grey seemed surprised to be approached for an 'interview'. Indeed the venue and time were hardly ideal, being the very midst of AWIC's National Seminar on books for children at India International Centre. Also, he seemed too modest to want to talk of himself.

It is so seldom that Arup Kumar Dutta ventures out of the wooded confines of home country in faraway Assam, that the opportunity was not one to be missed. Creator of what is veritably a new genre of gripping fiction set in India for our over 12s', Dutta has penned masterpieces like *The Kaziranga Trail*, *The Blind Witness*, *The Lure of Zangrila* (CBT),

among other books of adventure winning many literary laurels and acclaim both at home and abroad.

Dutta's pen brings alive the dark, dense forests of Assam, and skilfully penetrates the 'elephant country' in remote Arunachal Pradesh, painting vivid Indian settings for his thrilling stories that centre on serious themes like animal poaching, drug peddling etc. *The Kaziranga Trail* which won Shankar's Award for literature in 1979 has been translated into several Indian and foreign languages including German, Czech, Russian, Japanese and even Hungarian! Nearer home, it was filmed by the Children's Film Society of India, and "Rhino" (the film) was a major

draw at the 6th Children's Film Festival in New Delhi. *The Lure of Zangrila* has won an NCERT prize, and several other titles have won prizes in CBT's Annual Competition. *The Kaziranga Trail*, *The Blind Witness* and *Smack* are being translated into Japanese and Russian, and are being filmed too!

A dazzling array of achievements, considering that even today, priority given to juvenile literature and films in India is dismally minimal. He must be a born writer. He smiles modestly. "At the ripe old age of ten I did send a poem to the *Illustrated Weekly*, and received my first rejection slip!" There was evidently no shortage of these in the following years, but they did not smother the writer in him. "In fact, I developed a sort of immunity ... My first short story to be published was written during my university years. It was a soppy story called "Love and Death in the Mountains", and appeared in the *Caravan*."

Although a product of Sanawar schooling and Delhi University, where he did his M.A. in English, it was the return of the native to Assam. "I wanted to do something for my people." Here, the rolling landscape inspired him to take up his pen and "to churn out his masterpieces working 12 hours a day," and soon this lecturer of English literature in Jorhat in Assam gave up his job to be a full-time writer. Dutta writes both for children and adults as a regular columnist with local newspapers. "One can't survive on writing for children alone," he observes wryly. His forte is historical aspects of Assam and its wildlife. Presently, he is writing an adult novel, and a comprehensive book on the Great Indian One Horned Rhino. "I really can't say when these two projects will see the light of day, but I do hope it will be in my lifetime!" he quips.

What strikes one most about his work, apart from its racy style and action-packed plots, is his remarkable knowledge of

the jungle—its terrain, flora and fauna, of tribal ways and quaint local customs. One is soon lost in the dark density of the "tall hollong trees, their branches clawing the sky... the khokan, jutuli, ou-tenga and hillika, webbed with mikania, climatis and other varieties of creepers..." The picturesque use of local terms adds an authentic touch. References to tribal ceremonies—like the thread tying ritual to ward off evil before embarking on a trapping expedition, unusual local remedies etc. give his writing a distinct flavour.

How is this authenticity achieved? Dutta laughs. "I don't do as much homework for my adult columns or commercial assignments as my writing for children. In fact, it's a disproportionate effort considering how little remuneration I get from it." He prefers to look for material first hand. "Before I wrote *Revenge* which is set in Arunachal Pradesh, I stayed in a village for three weeks there with the Khampti tribe." It was time enough to pick up a smattering of the local dialect and customs, and to take photographs to help with descriptions. *Revenge* is an exciting story about an elephant trapping expedition which encounters a group of ruthless bandits. The Khampti tribe is renowned for its elephant trapping skills, and by the end of the book one is a lot wiser about elephants and their ways!

"I asked the village headman to let me watch some elephant trapping. However, it wasn't the right season, so a 'mock up' was arranged..." he recalls with amusement. "It was a complete dress rehearsal with the mahout, the 'phandi' (elephant trapper) etc. in their typical gear, and provided the material for the book."

In fact, painstaking research is a prelude to every book. "I visit many Game Sanctuaries and take long interviews with people concerned with forest conservation..." he explains. That is how *The Kaziranga Trail*, a fascinating story about

rhino poaching in the famed sanctuary was written. Other books like *The Blind Witness* grew out of real life experiences.

"Creation of an authentic background gives credibility to a story," he observes. "In the case of younger children, the line dividing fantasy from reality is wafer thin...but an older child desires greater realism in works of fiction." Although the adventure/entertainment element is most important in a story, a good adventure story transcends its existence as a mere entertainer, and has something more to offer to children, he feels. "While it is true that writers must guard against the temptation to preach sermons, it is equally true that a seriousness of purpose enhances the quality of an adventure story and sets it apart from the mindless fantasies cluttering our bookshops today ..."

Although his first book has been filmed, Arup Kumar Dutta does not seem too happy. "The book and the film are two different media, and translating from the written to the visual is very difficult. Distortions in the film nullify the intentions of the writer," he comments. The solution would lie in better interaction between writer and

script writer of the film. He has evidently won his point with the film makers, for he will be doing the script writing himself for the filming of his next book.

Will the story book survive in an audio visual age? He nods emphatically. "T.V. stifles the imagination for it gives a pre-fixed image. This is most harmful. As long as human imagination has lucrative value, the written word cannot be supplanted."

With upcoming writing talent for children in the country, and better standards of book production, will we be able to provide our own alternative one day to Blyton, Hardy Boys and all the rest? Can we give our youngsters literature that is indeed packed with fun and thrills, yet which they can identify with and will give them a better picture of this diverse land? Perhaps much of the answer would lie in offering writers of talent a future rewarding enough to tempt them to stay in the field and not stray. "A writer is the most vulnerable part of the publishing world," is Dutta's comment. "There must be better remuneration and recognition. Only then can he give his best."